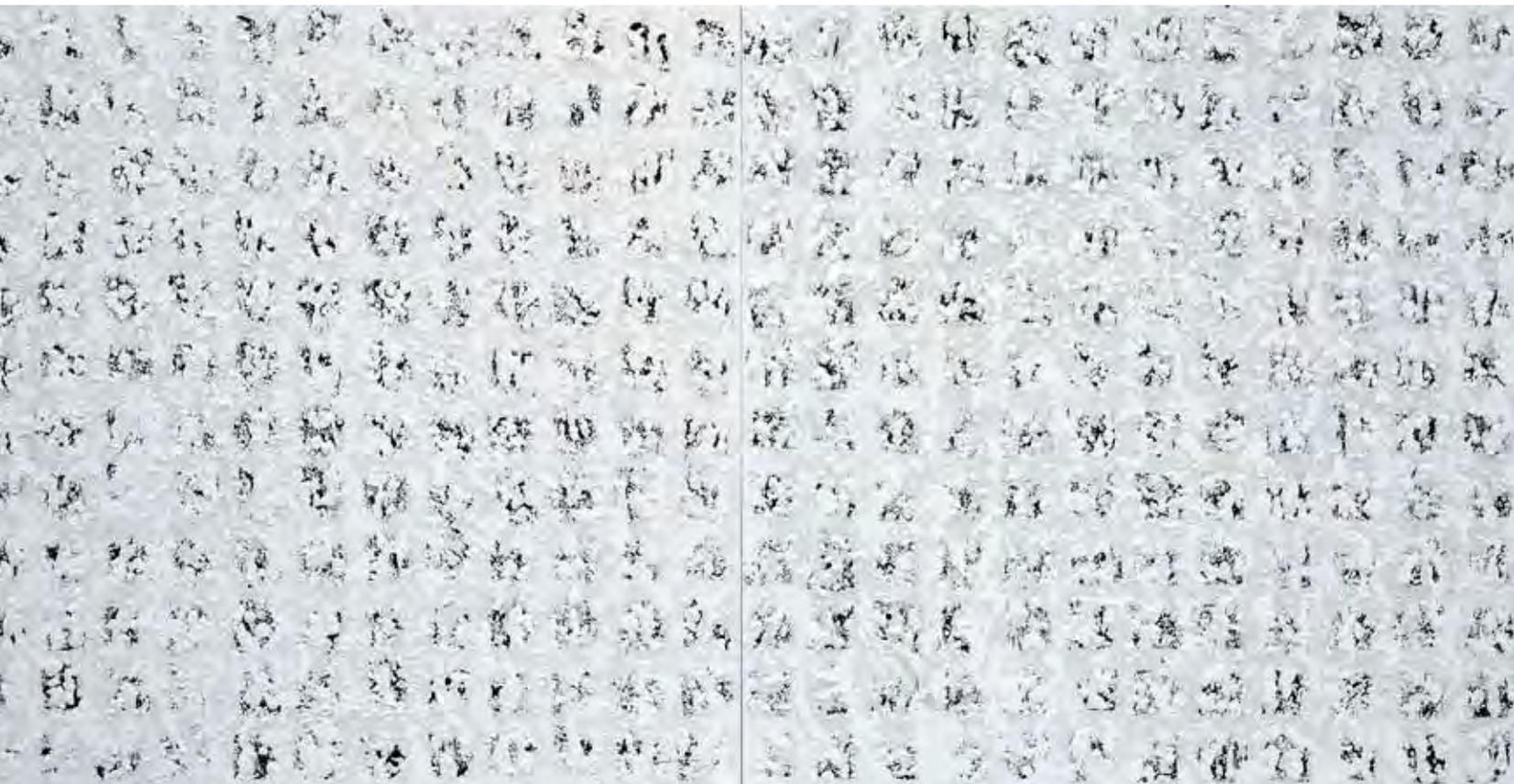


Thaier Helal: An Idea of Man and the Cosmos

By: Maymanah Farhat



Thaier Helal, *Snow and Trees*, 2008, 90 X 180 cm, Mixed media on canvas, Image copyright the artist. Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

In Thaier Helal's recent series, impastoed canvases serve as multi-sensory explorations of Syria's terrain, allowing the artist to figuratively reenter the now war-torn country. Textured strata, gestural brushwork, and earth-tone colour schemes meet in abstracted fields of media that resemble the surfaces of natural environments as resultant patterns delineate organic movement and growth. Created as two distinct bodies of work, Helal's latest paintings are rendered from memory and indicate a return to abstraction after several years of experimentation with appropriated imagery and found objects.

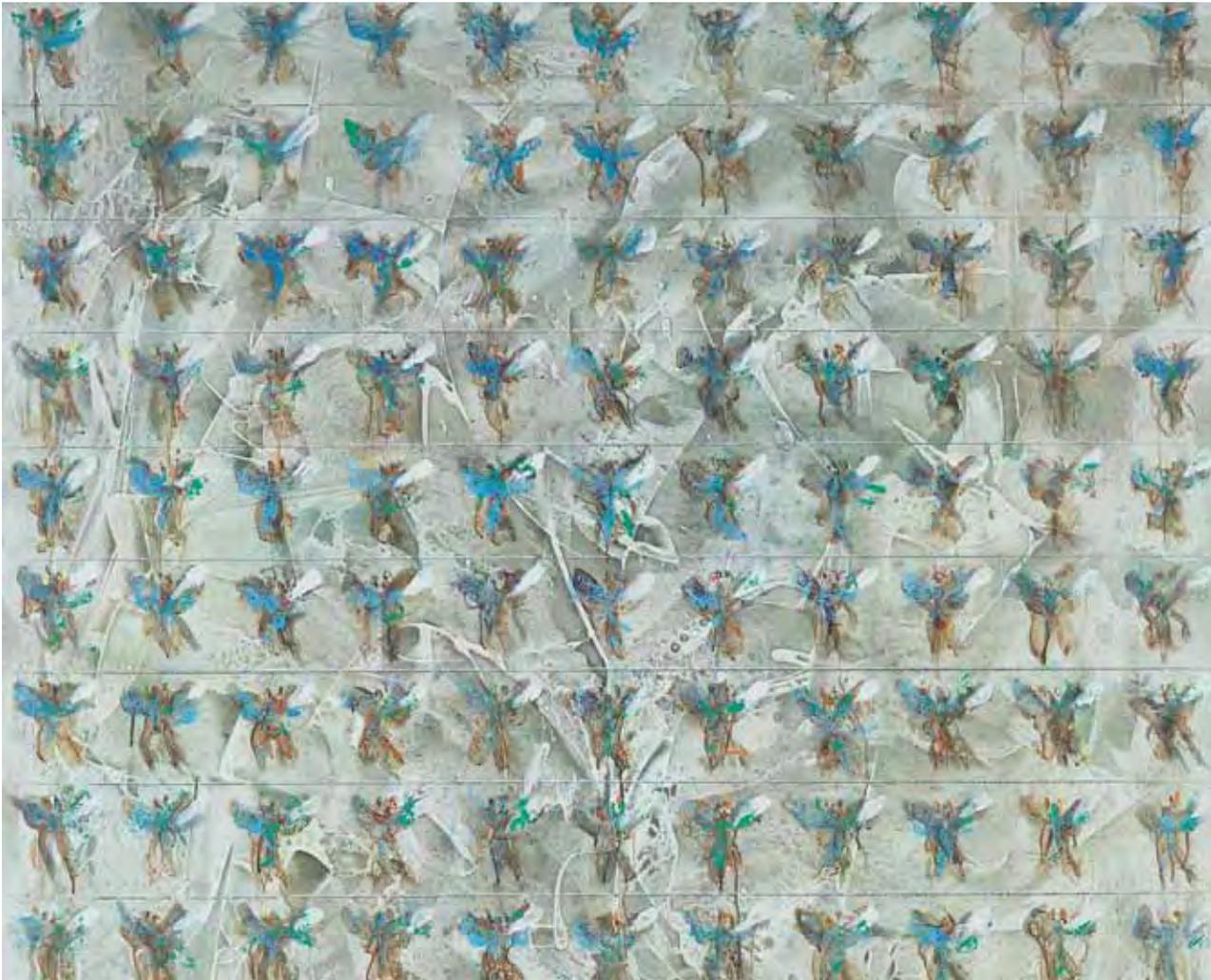
The artist's synesthetic works are based on perceptual experiences, and many recall the arid sceneries near his birthplace in southwest Syria. Additional canvases depict other areas or landmarks of the country, which he approaches through photographs when lacking familiarity. In a painting titled *Maaloula* (2014), for example, Helal captures the spectacular rock formations that envelop the ancient site as a natural fortress at the base of the Qalamoun Mountains. The ridges of the town's tiered mountainside come together to shield the sepulcher of Saint Thecla, the arches of which are shown behind the entrance of a cave that conceals

its frame under a canopy of shifting earthen folds. A groundswell in the foreground of the composition shelters an adjacent monastery. The vigorous layers of Helal's thickly painted landscape evoke the centuries-old legend of the entombed figure, a companion of Paul the Apostle who is said to have escaped persecution after a section of the tableland miraculously split open, offering a refuge. The artist created the work not long after the escalation of the Syrian war led to the bombardment and seizure of the town. Alongside paintings that portray the rugged clay-coloured facets of the anti-Lebanon mountain range, Helal has produced a series of works in which loose markings, raised applications of media, and the incorporation of leaves and stones describe Syria's waterways, particularly Al Asi River as it runs through the city of Hama. In large horizontal compositions, automatic brushstrokes fall across evenly distributed sediments of combined acrylic paint, sand, and powdered paper. Greyscale undercoats are overcome by aqua shades of colour, as liquid paths appear to flow before the viewer, passing over mudstones and mineral deposits. Helal's use of action painting to add finalising details magnifies the dynamism of this initial buildup, as the artist reconstructs the physical processes that continue to characterise Syria's topography: generation; erosion; deposition; propagation—landforms in transition. Beneath the mimetic coatings of Helal's Mountain and River series (2014) are grids that map the compositions of individual paintings. The artist's neo-expressionist works gradually evolve from these pictorial plots as he seeks 'rhythmic encounters' through symmetry and the repetition of forms, a configuration that is comparable to the geometric patterns of Islamic art, suggesting boundless space and time. This compositional element is also reminiscent of seed sowing, as small abstracted shapes are evenly distributed in horizontal rows. Helal attributes his interest in such spatial organisation to lessons from his childhood, specifically the practical knowledge that his family utilised in the maintenance of their large farm on the outskirts of the village of An Nasiriyah. The area's panoramic landscape, a picture of infinite measure, intrigued him early on; abiding imagery that he continues to conjure up in large-scale paintings and multi-panel compositions. There, Helal

absorbed what he describes as 'the code of nature.' Over the span of his artistic career, he has translated this empirical evidence into aesthetics, rendering observed forms and phenomena as abstractions or signs.

Beginnings

Helal's perceptive reading of his surroundings and the underlying structure of nature was first fully realised in his paintings of the late 1990s. While training at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Damascus, a decade before, he excelled at figurative painting and experimented with expressionist techniques. Although seemingly removed from the artist's later works, such exercises were crucial to his artistic development. An untitled student work, for example, reveals the influence of the college's teaching staff, particularly Mahmoud Hammad, who initiated the Letterism school of painting in the 1960s. Deconstructing Arabic calligraphy as cubo-expressionist forms, the Syrian modernist painter created floating geometric abstractions that suggest semantic shifts. In Helal's ink on paper work, drifting, semi-figurative shapes meet in the foreground of the composition, billowing against an abstracted background that fades with tonal variations. Atmospheric bodies that seem to rotate around the centralised surge resemble stones. Additionally, the artist's brilliant colour range includes silver blues and golden yellows and greens: metallic hues that continue to set apart his palette. Other pioneering artists also taught at the Faculty of Fine Arts while Helal was a student, notably Naseer Chaura, Fateh Moudarres, and Leila Nseir, who taught drawing. Prior to this period of academic training, his engagement with the modernist masters was limited to reproductions in magazines or occasional visits to museums in the Syrian capital where their works were on view. Attending the Faculty of Fine Arts confirmed his ability as an artist despite the objections of his family, who questioned the practicality of a career in painting. Upon graduating in 1991, Helal was accepted to the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris but declined the offer in order to practice art independently without burdening his parents further. As Helal pursued an undergraduate degree, he began to exhibit in Damascus art spaces with works that reflect the expressionist leanings of late twentieth-century



Thayer HELAL, 'Untitled', 140 X 140 cm, Mixed Media on Canvas, 2007.

Syrian art. Expressionism allowed local artists to depict reality through sociopsychological filters much like their German predecessors, who sought what Oskar Kokoschka identified as 'a level of consciousness at which we experience visions within ourselves,' an awareness of imagery that constitutes 'life selecting from the forms which flow towards it.' Fateh Moudarres, one of Syria's foremost expressionists, argued that this 'inner' realm was a 'rebel world' in which figures become tirelessly transformed—the canvas of the painter representing a small part of this playful process. Abstraction was key to Moudarres' rendering of Syrian subjects, from stylised portraits to expansive landscapes, with colour registering the 'alchemy' that 'operates in every living being.' For

the late artist, abstraction contained numerous mental images, without place or time determinants: crude materials that each viewer must interpret through a subjective lens.

Helal's early works utilise colour with corresponding intensity, depicting subjects whose forms seem to dissolve into abstracted areas of highly concentrated hues. In a 1994 untitled acrylic painting, a palette of deep reds serves as the index of a pensive portrait. Turbid brushstrokes swell around the face of a female protagonist whose features are painted with dense applications of medium, emphasising her detached gaze. The artist continued to employ figurative expressionism as his primary mode of representation until he gradually



Thaier Helal Untitled, from the Made in Syria series, (2012), 170 X 170 cm. Mixed media on canvas, Image copyright the artist. Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

moved towards pure abstraction after relocating to the United Arab Emirates. His interests shifted when he settled in Sharjah and worked as a designer and illustrator, as he felt distant from nature, the initial stimulus of his imagination. Embarking on a series of trials, he experimented with various approaches, destroying many of the results along the way.

The Element of Reality and the Personal Element

While few works from this transitional period exist, Helal retained the aesthetic concerns that underline his early paintings as he arrived at a point of artistic acuity. Working from the theoretical position that abstraction could better serve interpretations of nature given its

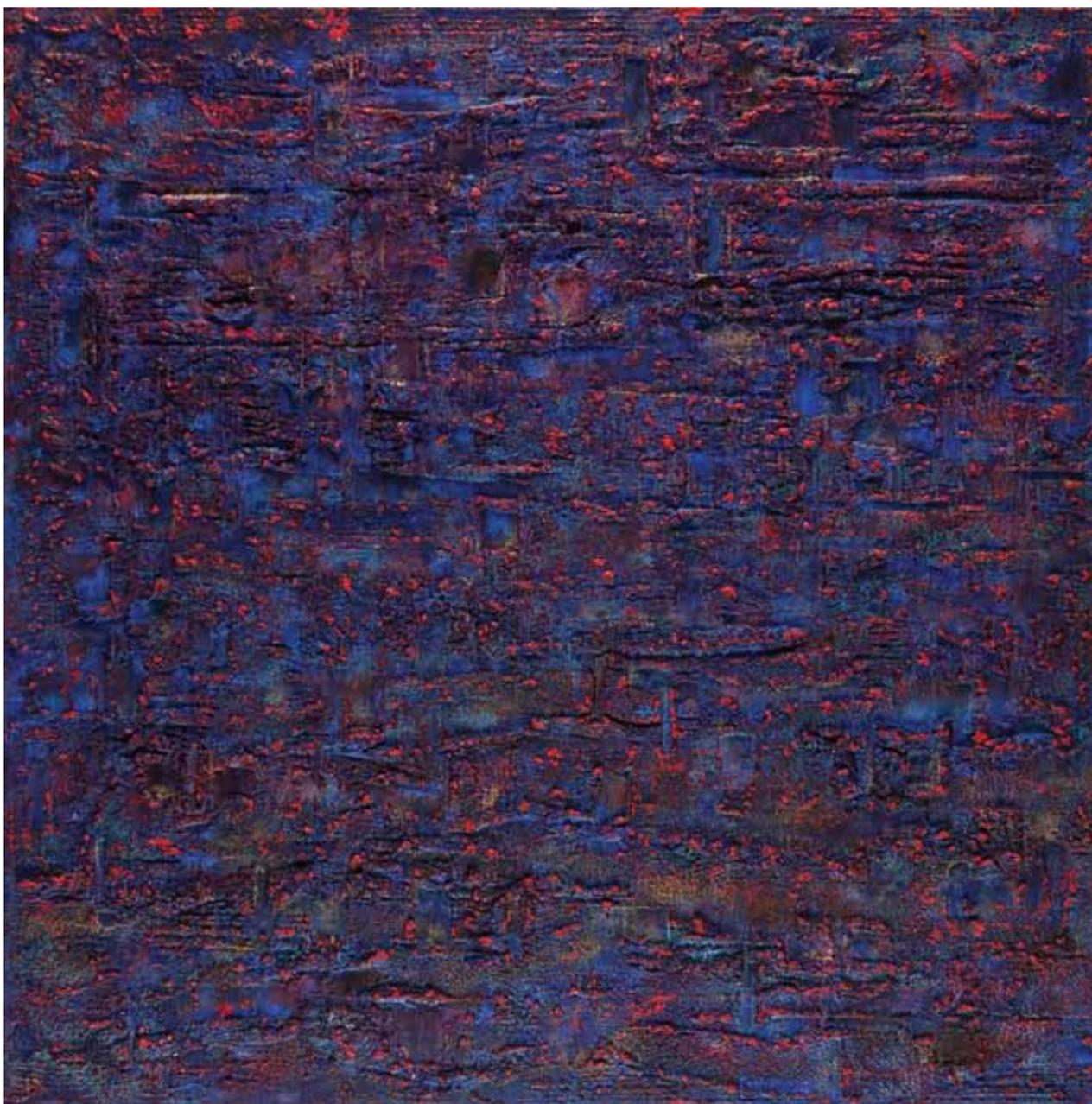
exclusive reliance on colour, brushwork, texture, and compositional balance (or imbalance), he sought to create a system of signs based on form. Although the historical legacy of abstraction includes examples that utilise non-objective principles to refer to reality, Helal was in search of a methodology that would allow him to depict phenomena beyond the limits of what the eye can immediately record. In order to capture what might be detected through the remaining senses, he composed a basic framework that not only unified his paintings in concept and form but also produced variations: an evolving picture of nature that considers all its variables. Some of the first paintings to incorporate the artist's renewed approach display the methodical divisions of



Thayer Helal 'Mountain 2', 170 X 170 cm, Mixed Media on Canvas, 2014.

space that would come to define his compositions. In an untitled 1997 acrylic on canvas painting, squarely placed images of a brown and black bird chart alternating actions. Situated against shallow spatial depth and without reference to traditional perspective, the abstract figures are shown flying, landing, and perching, collectively representing the process of flight.

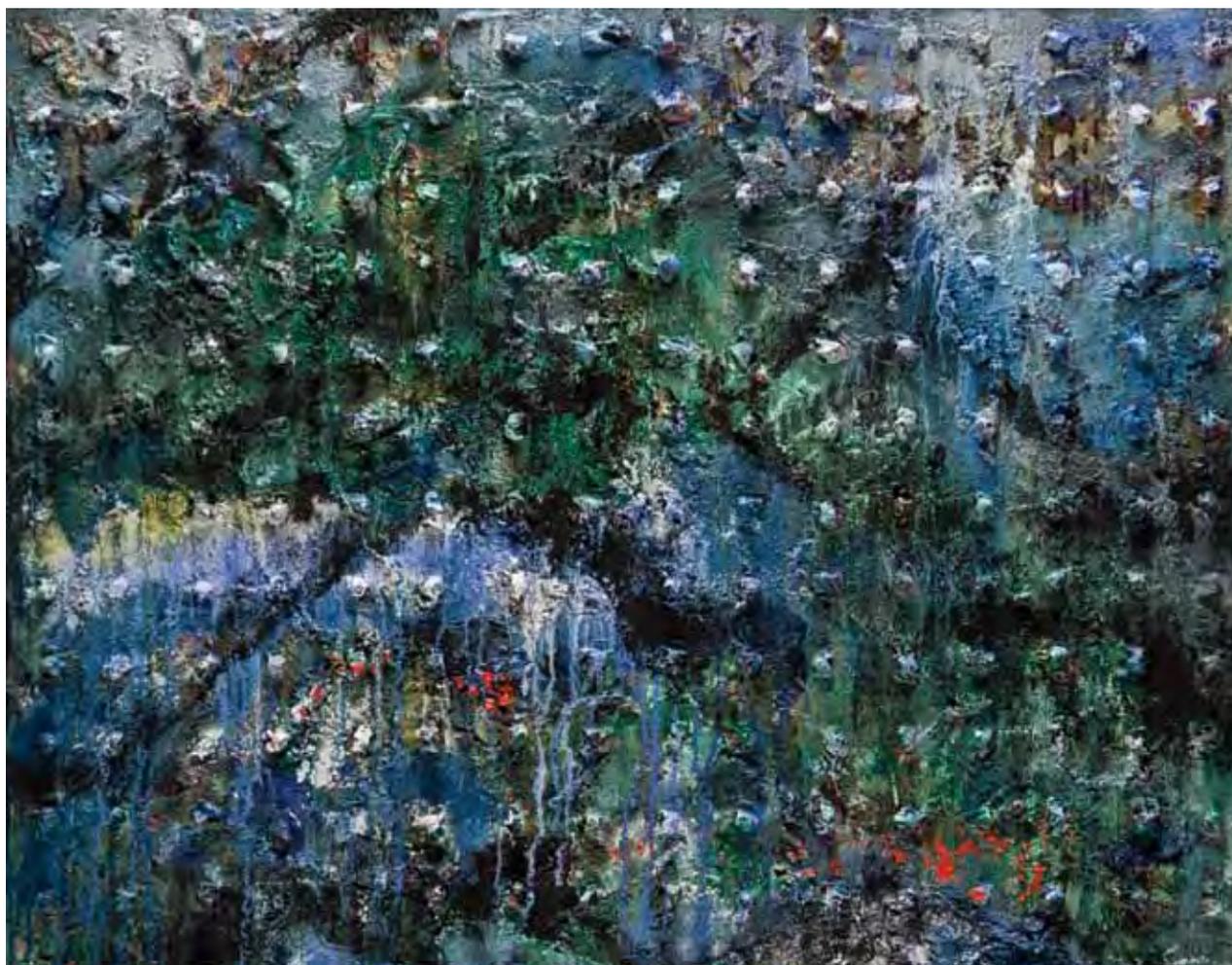
Fading earth tones coalesce as a backdrop; shades of black, brown, and blue emerge from the shadows at the edges of the composition and travel towards a central source of light. Such changes in luminosity allude to the passage of time over land or infinite sky, or perhaps a meeting of the two. Sand-coloured areas of the canvas that permeate patches of cool blue can also be read as



Thayer Helal, 'Night in the Mountain', 170 X 170 cm, Mixed Media on Canvas, 2014.

a rise in temperature. Subsequent paintings from this phase of the artist's oeuvre demonstrate his investigation of texture. In a series of small works on paper created in 1998, acrylic paint is liberally applied in order to achieve tactile surfaces from which the volume and mass of earth and water seem to slowly rise. Executed in a warm, airy palette, the paintings bring to mind

the radiance of the sun in the afternoon. Although resembling swathes of an environment that have been selected at random, the compositions can be viewed as complete landscapes, details of scenes to be finalised in the mind of the viewer. With such palpable imagery, Helal appeals to the place of memory and the associations that arise. As the painter increasingly explored the



Thajer Helal, *Spring in the Mountain*, 120 X 120 cm, Mixed Media on Canvas, 2014.

aesthetic possibilities of emphatic brushwork, he began to employ form to denote what cannot be experienced by touch. Helal returned to the image of a bird in flight in the mid 2000s, and portrayed the animal as though comprehended with different methods of perception. In paintings that show the creature in vertical takeoff, for example, colour fields appear to vibrate behind roused silhouettes as brisk brushstrokes cut through uniform spaces, signifying sonic impressions. Square lattices are painted over a number of works, enclosing the recurring creature. Mirroring the artist's previous paintings, the restricted spatial depth of these compositions directs the viewer to the thrust of the bird and its multicoloured contours. As Clement Greenberg observed in the seascapes of Gustave Courbet, the use of such relatively

flat compositional space provides access to the 'intangibility' of nature, the inanimate things that can only be recreated in painting through 'colour texture.' During this time, Helal also probed the intangible by merging the physical characteristics of a given scene with its living elements and environmental conditions in non-objective compositions that visually reproduce natural phenomena. In such works, the basic formal properties of painting (space, structure, texture, line, and colour) are assigned to each component in order to recreate sensory experiences. A snow-covered field in the diptych *Snow and Trees* (2008), for example, is painted as an undercoat of grey and white while black squares spaced across the canvas represent perennial plants and are covered in controlled white markings

rendered through action painting. Colour is used to signify both the time of day and the season, in addition to temperature; space and structure outline the setting; and the lines and textures of the artist's brushmarks describe snowfall as it rests on the branches of trees. The work's imagery is based on his recollection of winter landscapes near An Nasiriyah and the sensation of driving past fields blanketed in snow. The paintings that belong to this body of work, although executed in complete abstraction, can be viewed as landscapes, if one keeps in mind the definition set forth by Octavio Paz. A landscape, wrote Paz, 'is a metaphysic, a religion, an idea of man and the cosmos;' Helal's abstract paintings reveal its unique rhythms while excavating its intrinsic organisation. The artist's conceptual treatment of sensory stimuli eventually led to compositions in which other living systems are examined. Using photographic studies or images taken from news media as inspiration, Helal identifies the presence of social structures in animated or spontaneous gatherings. In *Ceremony* (2008), the events of a performed ritual are compressed as an abstract field of confetti-like brushmarks. Despite the sporadic placement of red, blue, and orange irregular dots that contribute to the outward chaos of the mixed media work, an under-colour of olive green contains faint traces of a thin black grid. The tension that exists between these contrasting elements is also the painting's primary source of vitality, an apt metaphor for societies in flux.

A Storm of Images

Deeply affected by the onset of the war in Syria, Helal first addressed the conflict by producing a series of works separate from his ongoing experimentation in painting. In comparatively pared down mixed media compositions created between 2011 and 2012, grainy black and white silkscreened images are set against shadowy backgrounds. Extracting photographs of tanks, fighter jets, and soldiers from media outlets and amateur photographs via online sources, the artist reworks their figural outlines as spectral cutouts. Set against stark backgrounds, the mechanisms of war are laid bare. The menacing quality of the series' pictures is derived from their likeness to mental images, quasi-perceptual experiences that involuntarily resurface,

indicating that the war has not only been brought home, but also haunts the mind as phantom imagery. Beneath black curtains of paint that function as backgrounds are matrixes of stamp-like reproductions of weaponry. In the years that immediately followed the outbreak of armed conflict in his native country, Helal's aesthetic framework was transformed by 'a storm of images.'

Overlapping with the artist's *Made in Syria* series are assemblages that contain toys, figurines, or beads attached to canvases in compact rows. When presented in large quantities, the spectacular sight of the gathered objects swallows their banality as miniature, plastic or metal casings reflect light or cast shadows across the canvas. Upon closer inspection, however, the political overtones of the works become clear. In *Traffic Jam* (2012), for example, the surface upon which die-cast toy military trucks are placed is painted with the same mixed media technique of his previous 'landscapes.' The 'colour texture' that locates the intangible in his work is replaced by the stuff of warfare.

With the paintings of the *Mountain and River* series, Helal retreats back into nature, offering a landscape that, although scarred by the recent conflict, possesses the potential for renewal.

Notes

1. Nada Al-Awar, 'Artistic Intuition: The Harmony of Thayer Helal,' *Damascus Calling: Contemporary Art from the Middle East* (Damascus: Ayyam Publishing, 2008).
2. Nada Al-Awar, 'A Quest for Synergy,' *Canvas Magazine*, (Dec 2006).
3. Oskar Kokoschka, 'On the Nature of the Visions,' trans. Heidi Medlinger and John Thwaites, *Kokoschka: Life and Work*, ed. Edith Hoffman (London: Faber & Faber, 1947).
4. Fateh Moudarres, 'In the Labyrinths of the Memory,' trans. Rania Samara and Jean-Francois Fourcade, *Moudarres* (Damascus: 1995).
5. Clement Greenberg, 'Review of an Exhibition of Gustave Courbet,' *The Nation*, 8 January 1949.
6. Octavio Paz, 'Landscape and the Novel in Mexico,' *Alternating Current* (London: Wildwood House: 1967).
7. Interview with the artist, September 2014.

About the Writer

Maymanah Farhat is a New York-based art historian specialising in modern and contemporary Arab art. Her reviews and essays have appeared in publications such as *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Art Journal*, and *Callaloo: Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters*, in addition to anthologies, monographs, and exhibition catalogues. She is the Artistic Director and Chief Writer of Ayyam Gallery.



Thayer Helal, *Political Map of the World*, 2014, 170 X 340 cm. Mixed Media, including beads and toys, on canvas, Image copyright the artist. Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

